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Interviewer: My name is Alicia Mittelman; I'm a curator at the Estes Park Museum. Today is Friday, March 21, 2014 and we are at the Estes Park Museum. We are about to interview Tommy Caldwell for the Estes Valley Mountaineering Oral History Project. It's a joint project between the Estes Valley Library and the Estes Park Museum. We are going to talk to him a little bit about growing up in Estes Park and developing some routes here and what's next in climbing. [This interview is also available in video format, filmed by Brian Brown. The interview was transcribed by Tom Williams with assistance from Alicia Mittelman.]

Just to get started, what is your full name?

Tommy Caldwell: Thomas Michael Caldwell.

Interviewer: When and where were you born?

Tommy Caldwell: I was born in Loveland, Colorado in 1978.

Interviewer: When did you move to Estes Park?

Tommy Caldwell: I moved to Estes Park around the time I was four years old.

Interviewer: Your father [Mike Caldwell] taught at a school in Loveland, right?

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, my dad taught at Bill Reed Middle School in Loveland, Colorado.

Interviewer: About the time you moved up to Estes Park, that's close to the time that you did that famous climb with him up the Bowels of the Owls at the Twin Owls.

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, that was actually probably before we move to Estes. We moved here because we lived down the hill and we'd come here every weekend anyways until we fell in love with the valley. My first climbing done up here in Estes was when I was three years old; I did my first roped climbing, that's what my family did and we climbed the Bowels of the Owls up the back of Twin Owls.

Interviewer: Do you have any memories of that day?

Tommy Caldwell: Not really, I think my mind recreates those memories a little bit because I was so young. I do kind of vaguely remember going through the chimneys and the narrow corridors. When I was three years old I wasn't much of a climber so it was more about my dad tying me in to the other end of the rope and dragging me up to the top of the mountain, but I loved it, I loved being outside with family. Yeah, it was cool.

Interviewer: What came after that?

Tommy Caldwell: Well I just kind of became one of the rambunctious little kids around here in Estes. I remember spending my summers riding all over the place on my mountain bike. My dad would often times go off on climbing expeditions because he was a mountain guide for the Colorado Mountain School. Our family during the summers, we would travel all over the western United States and then we'd climb on Lumpy Ridge a lot probably until the time I was nine or ten. We did a lot of climbing on Lumpy Ridge and I just remember cruising around the rocks and playing at the base and just being a little crag kid, me and my sister.

Interviewer: Was it on one of those family road trips that you pulled up to Devils Tower and climbed there?

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, we climbed a lot in Yosemite; we went to Yosemite every summer. We went to Devils Tower, I don't really remember that one because I was really young then too, I think I was four years old when we went up and we climbed Devils Tower. There wasn't many climbers that were that young back then so people thought that my family was super weird for going out and dragging little kids up these big rocks.

Interviewer: Then when you'd come back to Estes Park, if your father was a guide with CMS, you were probably around some other climbers. Were there any guides that you remember spending time with?

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, I mean my dad was, well my mom also worked for Colorado Mountain School for a bunch of years. So when I was in that school usually I was hanging out at the building and I even remember when it was in the, what is now the guide shack, the little building up there and then the big building down the hill was Komito's at the time. Eventually the Mountain School moved into that building. But yeah, there'd be these great guide meetings up at the Donahue's house in Allenspark and I remember hanging out with Tobias Donahue, he was one of my good friends and playing around in the woods and having big campfires while all the guides were hanging out in the house having these I guess meetings but really more like parties. Then after school I would walk over to Colorado Mountain School every day and hang out there. I remember Mike Donahue most vividly just because he was such a kind and thoughtful man. He was a really great guide and then Topher; his older son became a good friend of mine later in life. My fifth grade school teacher here in Estes was Bill McKee and he was also a guide for Colorado Mountain School, so I remember him really well and a great family friend. Yeah, there was a lot of them though.

05:12

Interviewer: So were your adventures year round? In the wintertime what did you do?

Tommy Caldwell: We did a lot of backcountry skiing in the winter. I definitely remember getting dragged across some of the lakes by the wind when I was just four or five years old out on, they really didn't make very good ski equipment for kids that young so I was always breaking my skis in half and having to ride on my dad's shoulders to get back out of the trails up there in the Park. There was a lot less people on the trails back then I think, in the winter at least.

Interviewer: So you became pretty familiar with Rocky Mountain National Park at a young age doing year round activities there. That's really neat. Was there some kind of competition between your father and some of the other CMS guides going up toward Halletts Peak?

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, I do remember that a little bit, I think it was probably around the time I was seven or eight years old that Colorado Mountain School decided that they wanted to do a little competition where all the guides, I think started at the Mountain School and then there all supposed to head up, climb a route on Halletts and then run across the Divide [Continental Divide] and climb a route on the Petit Grepon. My dad decided to take me along on that and we had one of his other best friends as well. So it was the three of us that was our team.

Interviewer: You did it, you completed it.

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, yeah it was cool. My dad was such a strong person in the mountains and I could kind of draft off him and he would drag me up these pretty cool big rock walls from the time I was really young which was a great experience. So I learned to love the mountains and I learned kind of what adventure was. I learned about thunderstorms, I learned about all these mountain things when I was super young.

Interviewer: Did you have any close calls with thunder or anything like that when you were young?

Tommy Caldwell: There's so much lightening around here in the summers. If you are on top of the mountains very much at all you're going to be around it or near it. There's no time that I remember thinking that I was close to death or anything like that but I do remember being quite excited and having to run down from the tops of the mountains as thunderstorms approached. When I climbed the Diamond for the first time I was twelve years old and I remember big ice chunks falling out of the D-1 Chimney and kind of floating around us and that seemed quite intimidating to me at the time.

Interviewer: I bet. How did you feel when you finished that climb?

Tommy Caldwell: I was just a little kid; it's kind of what we did. I might have gotten the same feeling that another kid gets at a Little League baseball game or something. It was just fun and exciting and something that I got to do with my dad and my dad was totally my hero at the time. If you ask my mom

about it, she said I had motivation to climb in the mountains. For my seventh or eighth birthday, she said, "It was my idea to go and actually hike up Longs Peak for the first time." She's like, "We didn't really push you to do it, we didn't say is like you can't do this until you thought you were ready to go hike Longs Peak." I don't remember that, I do remember loving being in the mountains with my family.

Interviewer: You got some press for it in our local paper. The Trail Gazette claimed that you were the youngest person to climb the Diamond. I wouldn't be surprised if that's still true.

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, that was fun for me at that age, getting into the local newspaper.

Interviewer: That's really neat. At what point did you begin competing?

Tommy Caldwell: My first climbing competition was at a small climbing gym in Boulder called Cats and I was probably around eleven years old. I was the only one that entered the kids division, so.

Interviewer: So you won.

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, so I won. [chuckling] They gave me the prizes for first, second and third place because I was the only one in it. There was a lot years in there in there where I wasn't really that interested in climbing; it's kind of what my family did, I would rather hang out with my friends. Probably around the time I entered middle school I got back into climbing because my dad was a teacher at Bill Reed Middle School and that's where I went to middle school as well. He started a climbing program so suddenly a lot of my friends were climbing as well and it was something I knew, it was something I could go and do with them. So that's when I really started to sort of take it up with my own motivations and not just because it was what my family did.

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Interviewer: At the 1995 Outdoor Sports Festival in Snowbird, Utah, do you have memories of that competition?

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, I was seventeen years old. That might have been the next competition after the one I did when I was eleven, I wasn't doing too many competitions. We were traveling around and doing a lot of sport climbing. My dad and I had started to develop the Monastery on our local sport climbing crag. I was starting to train a little bit and decided to go and enter that competition. It was cool for me because all of the people that I knew about in climbing, Boulder has always been such a hub for climbing and there's a lot of good climbers down there and they had entered the comp. So I really kind of entered it just to meet these people and be around them. I thought it would be cool to see what a climbing competition was like.

Interviewer: And you won it.

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah and I'd totally shocked my dad and me by winning it. We had just been doing our own thing in climbing, I had no idea how I measured up to other people so that was the first moment where I was like, "Wow, I've actually made some progress at this sport, I'm pretty good at it."

Interviewer: Let's go back to those middle school years when you started to climb with some friends and kind of had more of an opportunity to socialize with other people your age doing it. Did you get to climb with your friends outside or was?

Tommy Caldwell: Well I climbed with my friends during the school in the school program and then part of that school program was going to places like Shelf Road in Southern Colorado or Rifle and going to the climbing areas locally. Lumpy Ridge, we did a few trips like that and those were great. But mostly I did my local climbing in the summer with friends that I would meet around here and most of the time, I was fourteen, thirteen or fourteen, fifteen years old and I was climbing with eighteen, nineteen, twenty year olds. Partially because they had driver's licenses but also there just weren't other young kids climbing at that time. I always had restaurant jobs downtown and so I'd meet other people that were into climbing and we'd get up early and go to Lumpy Ridge and climb and then come back and work our jobs at night.

Interviewer: Downtown in Estes Park?

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah.

Interviewer: Where did you work?

Tommy Caldwell: I worked at a Mexican food restaurant called "La Casa" that's no longer there; it's where Kirks Fly Shop is now for a bunch of years. Before that I worked at Carmel Corn, I'm not even sure if that's here, sort of a little candy store. When I was eleven I actually got a job at a hamburger joint that's no longer here over across from the Country Super Market. I was always a busboy or a dishwasher.

Interviewer: Oh, I didn't know that. You made a reference to the Monastery, let's talk about that. Can you explain how you and your father went about doing some of the route development there?

Tommy Caldwell: There was a climber in town named Lawrence Stuemke who was into sport climbing. Which there wasn't really any sport climbing around here back then, there was a couple routes. Bolting was actually super controversial. He found this outcropping of rocks down near Drake by plane. I think he had gone up in a plane with somebody and spotted it by air and then went in there and actually kind of looked around. And then he got so excited about it that he brought my dad in the next day and then he

got excited about it and bought a power drill and we went there and we started bolting sport routes. I think we found it in like October and we were so excited that we would drive up that road in our little two wheel drive Honda and have to like push it up the road to the Monastery. We actually bolted this crag through the winter so it was rough. It was super windy up there and below zero a lot of the time. We'd put on all of our clothes and go up there and establish this sport climbing area so that the next spring we'd be able to go and have a lot of climbs to do. Sport climbing in general was getting popular in the United States so we saw it as the future. All the old traditional climbs on Lumpy were kind of old school to us at that point. We felt that we were on the forefront of something new and something cool.

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Interviewer: So there wasn't any doubt in your mind at the time that bolting was a good thing to do in that area?

Tommy Caldwell: I think I just looked to my dad. We knew it was legal because we researched that, it was on National Forest Land and you're allowed to do it there. My dad just saw it as kind of the next big thing in climbing and that was the way forward. He doesn't think too much about what other people are going to think of it. [chuckles] So we did it and I think because it wasn't alongside traditional climbs it was not easy to protect with gear. It worked out, nobody complained, nobody really got mad at us about it. I do remember at first we would bolt climbs and if there was any chance to put in natural protection, we wouldn't put a bolt there. So it was kind of this weird hybrid where you'd have to climb with a few pieces of gear and then later other people came back and put in bolts at all those and it became just a complete sport climbing area, which really it's better off that way.

Interviewer: Before we get into the specifics of some of the routes there, tell me a little bit more about how you and your dad preserved during those really windy cold times that you were out there drilling. I understand that you guys had a method of putting your hands in snow to make them numb so that.

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, we figured out that climbing in the winter that our hands would freeze. But then they would get to a point that they got so cold, and ice climbers know this, that then your body would warm up and then they would get flushed with blood and you'd get this sensation that actually really hurts when they got flush with blood. But then they wouldn't get cold again. So when we'd go climbing at the Monastery we'd purposely make that happen at the beginning of the day in the winter. Most of the time we just bolted but we did get so excited about some of our routes that we'd climb them in the winter. So that's what we'd do, we'd put our hands in the snow, let them freeze, take them out and let them get that rush of blood and then we were able to climb without our hands freezing.

Interviewer: So you got a little bit of climbing in but mostly kind of setting the stage for what would come in the spring and summertime there?

Tommy Caldwell: Yep.

Interviewer: There are some pretty famous routes there, the Dream Catcher and then Third Millennium. Can you tell me about those?

Tommy Caldwell: The area is a series of towers and it's geologically pretty fascinating. Three sides of the tower is this very knobby rock that was obvious to us from the beginning that that seemed pretty climbable. But the one side was covered in this patina that looks like good grain. It's super beautiful but from the ground they look pretty blank because all the holds are these little seams and they're inset so at first we didn't think that they were climbable at all. We thought that those walls would be impossible to climb. But eventually we decided to take a look and we found all these secret little holds and then we bolted a few routes and they turned out to be amazing. I feel like there're some of the best sport climbing in Colorado. It was so cool to come across that and discover something like that and be part of developing it. So some of the routes have become quite well known people from around the country or even around the world will come just to specifically do these climbs just because they're very unique. The rock is really good and there're beautiful.

Interviewer: Yeah, it's a bit of a hike to get there.

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, it's a nice hike in there and it's just a nice area.

Interviewer: What motivated you guys to name the route, the Third Millennium?

Tommy Caldwell: I don't know, you'd have to ask my dad about that, he named all those routes. I don't even remember. I'm sure he has a whole story behind every name, he thinks a lot about that stuff, but I can't even remember.

Interviewer: I'm curious, what brought you back there a couple of years later to do the Grand Old Opry?

Tommy Caldwell: Well the Third Millennium was one of the blanker looking walls

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and I bolted it and worked on it for a long time and then it was my hardest sport climb and then there's this piece of rock to the right which was a little bit longer and a little bit more blank and I went down it and put in a few nuts and tried top roping it and decided that it was completely impossible. But then my dad convinced me to go back like three of four

years later and try it again. It was funny, because I did try it again, I was like, “Nope, this is still impossible.” But he just kept urging me; he believed it was possible somehow. So we decided to bolt it and I started working on it and eventually figured out all the moves and now it’s really famous, great climb.

Interviewer: Did it happen to be that there is one move or two moves that kind of unlocked it or was it just a lot of hard work doing it over and over again?

Tommy Caldwell: It was at a point in my climbing where I was improving really fast and I had no idea of my capabilities. I had no idea what was possible so I might think something was impossible one day and then be able to do it the next. That’s just what happened on that climb. I think the whole thing just seemed too hard, all the holds were small, it was too blank. I could do a couple moves on the whole route and then eventually I started to piece them all together and that was such a cool process. These days I never really make claims, I never say things are impossible anymore because there are so many times when I think that’s the case and then younger kids will come along and do it.

Interviewer: You were one of those younger kids.

Tommy Caldwell: Yep, yep.

Interviewer: That brings up an interesting point about climbing and where is that line of impossible and what is possible?

Tommy Caldwell: I mean it’s happened throughout climbing history. People think something will be impossible and then somebody will prove that’s not the case. So I don’t think you can make claims like that.

Interviewer: That’s really exciting. Another great climb was Sarcasm [Sarcasm on Ship’s Prow] a 5.14a near Chasm Lake. That was a completely different environment; you are up in the alpine. Where did that idea come from to go up and do that?

Tommy Caldwell: Well I felt pretty attached to the Diamond because it’s Colorado’s premier big wall, so it’s right above Estes, you can see it. But for a lot of years, for my teenage years I was mostly a sport climber. But we had some friends in Boulder who went up and they did a climb on the Ship’s Prow, they named it Baloney Pony but they had skirted around this really clean arete at the bottom. One of them believed that it was possible; the other one believed it wasn’t possible so they made a bet that somebody could climb it someday. Then the person who was right would have to take the other one to like Flagstaff House in Boulder which was a really fancy restaurant. Climbers were dirt poor; they can’t afford to go into restaurants like that. So they made big bet and then I was one of the people at that time that was going around and trying to do all the hardest routes in Colorado. So they came to me and they said, “You should check this out, it’s close to your

home.” The idea of sport climbing way up high in elevation in the alpine environment was something we just really hadn’t even thought of back then. The Monastery was a sport climbing area but the Diamond was kind of a trad climbing area. So we had to sort of look outside the box to think of climbing something that had no way to naturally protect it. It was going to have to be a sport climb. But it was so beautiful, it was a really clean line so we decided to go up there and give it a shot. We climbed the Baloney Pony and then we had to rappel down and we setup a top rope on that arete. I started feeling for holds and trying to figure out if I could climb it and eventually decided I could. So we hand drilled all the bolts and put in a few days’ of work and climbed it. It’s beautiful, I feel super lucky to have come to the Estes area and been here at a time when these climbs were just becoming possible for me and for the world of climbing, because five years before that nobody around could have done them just because climbing gyms were enabling us to get stronger than people had been in the past.

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Interviewer: Did you have any doubts about hand drilling that route because given that hand drilling is a lot of work, but it’s also when you do bolt something it’s kind of a gift to others so that they can get up there and climb it. But this is one at a really hard grade. Did you think, “Oh, after I do this who else will come here?”

Tommy Caldwell: I don’t think we gave that a whole lot of thought. I mean I was a teenager; I was at a point where I wanted to like prove myself in the world of climbing and so we were trying to push the boundaries wherever we could. That’s why we bolted that climb, the idea of having a route that hard at a high elevation was cool to us. I don’t think we really bolted it as a gift for others, that would be nice to say that we did that but I don’t think that would be the truth. [chuckling]

Interviewer: Tommy, is this around the same time you mentioned going around the state? Was this the same time that you did Flex Luthor in Rifle? [5.15a – Fortress of Solitude]

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, it probably was around that time. My dad was such a great partner for me and we climbed everything together and we went all over the place trying to figure out where the hardest climbing was that we could find. But we were somewhat limited to the fact that I was still in high school. We’d climb around here, a lot of times we go to the Western Slope of Colorado and we got word of a big limestone cave over there and we went and checked it out and it looked great so we started bolting it and that’s where Flex Luthor is. And then another route that was one of the hardest sport climbs in America at the time called Kryptonite. We named the crag the Fortress of Solitude because everybody was going to Rifle which is a nearby crag at the time. In Rifle there’s a road going right through it,

there's a lot of people around, it's a picnic area. This was a similar type of climbing but you had to walk an hour up hill and there was nobody up there so we felt like we had this whole cave to ourselves. So we named it the Fortress of Solitude.

Interviewer: In that period when you were training so hard, can you explain what got you into that high level of climbing?

Tommy Caldwell: Well, climbing competitions were taking off; there was a whole circuit of national competitions. There was probably, and regional, like a whole climbing association had started and they would host six regional climbing competitions around the country and then one national one. I just started competing in those. Boulder had a few climbing gyms that were some of the better ones in the country and that's really what got me into trying to climb hard was the climbing competitions. They gave us the community that was something other than just me and my dad; it gave me other people to be motivated to climb with. Then just the whole idea of competing is a very motivating thing, especially for a teenager. [Interviewer: I bet.] I ran cross country in middle school and I was a wrestler all the way through my freshman year in high school but then I started doing these climbing competitions so that was my new sport. I was always part of it but that's what I started competing in.

Interviewer: At that time, is it true that you became friends with folks like Chris Sharma and you kind of built on that community of other climbers who would become sponsored and become professional climbers themselves?

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah for sure. The climbing gyms were getting popular and therefore climbing was accessible to younger people, at that time became accessible to younger people right at that time if they started those competitions. So that circuit of competitions is where I met that whole generation of climbers, that's where we all got started. So we would meet at the climbing competitions and then we plan road trips together and we all became really close friends.

09:12

Interviewer: You had kind of later transitioned out of sport climbing and get back into traditional climbing. I'm wondering why traditional climbing came to dominate your style later and freeing [free climbing] a number of the climbs that had previously been aid climbed.

Tommy Caldwell: Unlike my friends that had started climbing in the climbing gyms, I had started climbing just a bit before that, so I learned how to climb at places like Vedauwoo [Wyoming] and Lumpy Ridge So my first climbs were done on traditional gear. So I think it was probably around the time I was seventeen, I remember that some sport climbers from Europe, Alex and Thomas Huber came to the United States and freed El Capitan in

Yosemite. And Lynn Hill had freed the Nose a few years before that and it opened my eyes to the idea that people who were actually sport climbers could take that strength that they learned in sport climbing and take it to traditional climbing and big wall climbing. I already had a little bit of knowledge when it came to traditional climbing, my dad was a great mentor, he had climbed El Cap a bunch of times when he was younger. All of a sudden my focus went there; I decided that that's what I wanted to do. I went to the Utah desert first and kind of relearned how to crack climb because I hadn't really done it in ten years. Then went to Yosemite and decided that I was going to free climb the Salathe Wall. In terms of the grades of that, it didn't look that hard actually, compared to what we had bolted at the Monastery and climbed at the Fortress. So I figured that I'd just be able to go and do it but I had no idea how hard it would be. So I went out there and at first I climbed it with my dad but we got totally shut down in trying to free climb it. It beat me up but it was really exciting. The exposure was huge; it was thrilling unlike anything I had experienced in my life. I just became fascinated with it. Then I started working on it more and it turns out that my background of being in the mountains around here and learning a little bit about crack climbing and traditional climbing, but also just being kind of a tough kid from growing up. Getting blown across the lakes in Rocky Mountain National Park and skiing and bolting routes through the winter at the Monastery, it made it so that I had a lot of the skills that were needed to transition to big wall free climbing. It was just super exciting to be able to go to Yosemite and see El Cap as this thing that looked totally impossible and huge as a kid. Then come back, thinking that I could free climb but then get totally shut down and then just like progressing to getting better and better at it and then going there and having success and being able to establish new free routes. Yeah, it was just a really exciting time.

Interviewer: How old were you when you did the Salathe Wall?

Tommy Caldwell: Well I climbed it for the first time unsuccessfully, well we aid climbed it so that might be confusing. We went there with the intention of free climbing it but we got shut down so we pulled on our gear and climbed it the more traditional way which is aid climbing and got to the top, I think when I was seventeen years old. Then I came back the next year having kind of obsessed about it and was able to successfully free climb it that time.

Interviewer: Why did you obsess over it?

Tommy Caldwell: Just because it was something that seemed so exciting but, I felt like I should be able to do it and I was wrong. I got so beat up on it and the whole idea of sort of overcoming something that was so scary but at the same time exciting for me was something that I really wanted to do.

Interviewer: I'm going to hop back to talking about the Diamond a little bit. Do you remember that day that you and Topher Donahue went up there and did five climbs in a row? [Tommy Caldwell: Yeah.] What was the plan that day?

Tommy Caldwell: The plan was to just climb as many routes as we could on the Diamond in a day. Topher was really into these big linkups. We sort of used the mountains around here as training for going to bigger mountains in other places in the world. I hadn't done much of that but Topher had. So the way to make the mountains here bigger is to just climb a lot of routes in a row. So that's why we went up there and we had no idea how many we'd do, we just brought a bunch of food with us and we climbed up to Broadway and left a bunch of stuff on Broadway and then just started lapping the Diamond. Yeah, it was a super cool day. I got to climb all over that wall in a single day which was. Usually just going up there once and hiking down is so exhausting and you just get one route out of it. So the idea of just only having to do the hike once but doing fire routes was really cool.

Interviewer: Wow that must have been something else for the other climbers there seeing you lap them a few times.

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, and Topher and I climbed really well together so we did a lot of simul-climbing. We weren't stopping to belay that much and so we were able to climb really fast. It was really fun.

15:01

Interviewer: It seems like you were both kind of toughened up as kids in this environment here in Estes Park.

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, the mountains here, they're not giant but the weather's pretty harsh and we both grew up in these households that were full of mountain climbers and so that gave us the skills to do that kind of stuff.

Interviewer: How else has the climbing here prepared you for some of your adventures around the world?

Tommy Caldwell: I think more than anything it sort of just lit the match at the beginning. These mountains are beautiful and my dad brought me into them and I fell in love with them. That just made me fall in love with climbing in the mountains around the world, so it all started here and I was able to build upon that.

Interviewer: Could you maybe share some of the specifics of your training while you are in Estes and before you embarked for the Fitz Traverse, which you just accomplished with Alex Honnold.

Tommy Caldwell: Well Estes is a great place to come home to, partially because my family is here and I just love the area. But also it provides the perfect training ground for me and for a long time that was because of places like the Monastery. There is a good place to go sport climbing but more recently it's because of the bouldering. This is really a bouldering hot spot now, people travel from all over the world and the Estes Valley is known as one of the premiere spots to come and go bouldering in the summer. For me bouldering is the best training I can do. I always have tons of bouldering problem projects in the Estes Valley and that keeps me motivated. It gives me these little things to obsess on. It makes my fingers strong and then I can go and ride my bike up Trail Ridge Road or go climb on the Diamond or go to the Monastery and there's just so many opportunities for great climbing around here. You are always in this beautiful environment.

Interviewer: You like to go back to the Monastery?

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, I use it almost like climbing gym in the summer. I go there and just try to climb routes that I've already done. Yeah, it's great.

Interviewer: That must be interesting for you to kind of see the Estes Valley and Rocky Mountain National Park, its reputation to climbers sort of evolve for it first being known for the high peaks and that was kind of the goal. And then you see Lumpy Ridge and some of the lower subalpine climbs be exciting for traditional climbers. And then you develop sport climbing and now you see bouldering really shooting up here.

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, it's provided a great venue for all types of climbing. It's really one of the best places around to climb because it's got a little bit of everything.

Interviewer: Did you ever entertain the idea of living someplace else?

Tommy Caldwell: Oh yeah, I lived in Yosemite for two years at one point. I've thought about living all over the place but I mean this place is great for so many things. It's great for climbing and my family lives here, that's going to bring me home all the time. I'm pretty sure I'm going to live here for the rest of my life.

Interviewer: What's it like Tommy when you go someplace where climbing is the focus, say it's a Reel Rock Film Festival, or you're at a climbing gym and it's not uncommon for somebody to ask for your autograph. Whereas then you come to Estes and you kind of have a low profile here, what's that like to switch gears from being recognized right away and then having a quieter life here in Estes?

Tommy Caldwell: I think it's pretty important for me to be able to have a little bit of a quitter life. Going to Yosemite I've spent so much time there, it's a little bit exhausting to have people coming up to me all the time. Although, at the same time it's great, I feel super lucky to be in that position and if people can draw inspiration from what I'm doing, that's amazing, that's really

incredible. It is nice to come home and I think the reason I'm more low profile here is because I know all the locals actually; they know I'm just a normal dude. They're not going to come up to me and ask for my autograph, [chuckling] generally because I see them at the

19:35 [End of Part B.]

[C].

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restaurants or I see them around town and we're just all friends.

Interviewer: How do you pick your objectives in the Park nowadays in addition to bouldering, I know that you were on the Diamond last summer and did something pretty big up there?

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, it's harder these days to find the big sport climbing or traditional climbing objectives. It's just been climbed out so much, except for the bouldering. There's plenty of bouldering that can keep me busy for the rest of my life around here. But I've spent so much of my life here that I've climbed almost every route in the area. So if something pops up on my radar whether I see it while climbing something else or my dad mentions it to me or one of my friends goes up and checks out just a part of the wall that I never thought about climbing on, that's the way that it's shown. For the most part I'm not actually looking for bigger objectives around here anymore, sport climbing objectives. But if one comes around I get super excited about it so I'll go and try to do it.

Interviewer: Do you remember the day you did the Honeymoon is Over?

Tommy Caldwell: Yep, yep I remember that well. It was really amazing, this guy Erick Doub from Boulder, he had spent months up there putting in bolts and trying to decide whether it was a free climb. Eventually he did decide it was a free climb but he didn't think he could do it so he called me up and told me about it and kind of gave me permission to go and free climb a route that he had put a lot of work into, which was really generous. I went up there with my dad again and we climbed about half way up the route one day. The Diamond tends to be pretty wet a lot of the time so we ended up climbing into a kind of wet part of the wall and getting pretty soaked and having to rappel off. Then the second time I came back we lucked out and the weather was good and it was dry enough to climb. I'd done so much bouldering and so much sport climbing, but enough big wall climbing that I kind of had all the skills to do it at that time. So it was interesting, these climbs have become a little bit famous around Colorado but at the time that I did them I didn't really think about that that much because I didn't realize that, I mean I guess I realized a little bit that I was pushing the standards but I thought that other people if they tried it they'd be able to do it. But that was a route that really stood out as I did it and people tried

it for a decade after that and then I think it finally just got climbed maybe a year or two ago by a friend of mine, Johnathan Siegrist.

Interviewer: That's great. Tommy was it last summer that you were up on the Diamond and you got involved with a rescue?

Tommy Caldwell: Yep, that was last summer.

Interviewer: What happened that day?

Tommy Caldwell: I was trying to free climb a route called the Dunn-Westbay which Josh Wharton, he did a variation on it a few years before that and he was the one that mentioned it to me. He thought that if you just took the direct line it would be a really cool route. So I started going up there like every other day or every third day, I started trail running to the top of Longs actually and dropping a rope down and rappelling down and working on it by myself. Then I think it was the first day that I was going to go and try and start at the bottom and climb it. I went up there with Johnathan Siegrist. We got to the North Chimney on a day in like August and the Diamond is pretty popular. And the easiest way up to Broadway is the North Chimney but it's pretty loose, there's a lot of loose rock and so we got up there and I think there was four or five parties trying to climb up the North Chimney to get to the big ledge, Broadway, and then they were all going to do different routes up above. But it's pretty common for that chimney to get chocked full of people and for people to be knocking off rocks. That's exactly what happened, we got to the base and we decided to climb off to the right so that we wouldn't be below people and wouldn't be in the line of rock fall.

04:34

Got a few hundred feet up the Chimney and heard a bunch of people yelling, "Rock", and a bunch of rock came down the Chimney. I didn't really realize that anybody had gotten hurt at first but I continued climbing up the Chimney and eventually got to, there were three parties that sort of congregated in this one area right around this place where this guy had fallen. We don't know why he fell really; he might have gotten hit by a rock from somebody from above us. That's most likely what happened. Nobody had quite clued into the fact that this guy was really hurt. I think everybody was just hoping that he had just kind of gotten stunned. He had fallen about fifty feet but he had bounced a bunch of times. I got there and I took one look at him and I thought that he was really in bad shape. So we just started rallying everybody and we organized a rescue as fast as we could. We got somebody to call the rangers from Broadway on their cell phone. Then we fixed ropes all the way down the Chimney and then the rangers got there and we hauled up a gurney and all the rescue equipment and it was a pretty hair raising rescue because I think there ended up being seven of us right around this guy trying to get him in a gurney. It was

pretty obvious that his back was broken and he was covered in blood and his neck was broken as well and a bunch of ribs and he had punctured a lung and he was in really bad shape. We were on these teetering blocks of choss and we had to figure out how to get him in the gurney and get him on IV [intravenous fluids] and it was pretty amazing to work with the rescue squad here in Rocky Mountain National Park and have them direct everything. And see their systems but also be able to help out. We ended up getting him down and I'm sure that the rescue rangers along with us saved this guy's life. It was a pretty crazy thing, I had never seen, in all the time I've spent in the mountains I'd never seen anybody get hurt that badly.

Interviewer: Did it really bother you, did that stay with you or were you able to kind of separate that experience and come back and work on your objective?

Tommy Caldwell: It didn't bother me too much and I think that the people who climb a lot, they tend to think that they know how to avoid dangerous situations like that. Some of that may be true and some of that may be just us wanting to keep doing what we are doing so we justify it that way. I looked at that situation and I said, "I wouldn't have climbed below people in the Chimney." I just decided that if I was in that situation I probably wouldn't have gotten hurt. So it didn't bother me that much. Since then, like when I was in Patagonia a friend of ours died and he died doing something that I did fifty times while I was down there. His rope got caught, he pulled on it and he pulled a block on his head. When somebody dies then, I'm like, "That could have been me." That bothers me a lot more. The one in the North Chimney, I was like, "I wouldn't have gotten in that situation myself, most likely."

Interviewer: Although it's a certain kind of awareness that you get only with experience I imagine.

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, yeah for sure.

Interviewer: So then you returned to do the Dunn-Westbay and you succeeded at that. [Tommy Caldwell: Yep.] I'm going to just finish with a couple more questions. I'm curious Tommy, since you've grown up here have you seen changes in the climbing community?

Tommy Caldwell: I've definitely seen a lot of changes in the climbing community. When I was a little kid the climbing community I knew was all around the Colorado Mountain School, the Donahue family was the center of it all. It was very humble; it was kind of magical in my mind. All of these people were just living only to climb. Mountain guides made no money at all really but they had all these clients that would return to the mountain school every year. Mostly because they loved the Donahue's and it was just a really cool environment of nature lovers really. Then I started to see more climbers come to the Estes area and then my dad was at the forefront

of the first sport climbing that went on here. Before we even found the Monastery he was bolting climbs at Lumpy Ridge and this was hugely controversial. So he would put up a sport route, someone would come along and chop all the bolts. There became a pretty distinct divide and I saw there was like the traditional climbers and then there was like the sport climbers. They really didn't intermingle. There was like this big wave surfers, like the long board surfers and the short board surfers. They'd get in fights and they would always be arguing and so there was a period of time where I was trying to decide where I was on that and I kind of took the sport climber's approach. I thought that was the way forward. There was a lot of ego involved for a long time. And then I think years later it kind of all came back together and I think it had to do with Lynn Hill and the Hubers [Alex and Thomas Huber] had kind of taken the sport climbing approach. But then come back around and been pushing the limits of traditional climbing. So the traditional climbers all of a sudden were like, "Oh man, I guess sport climbing is the way forward even for us." So a lot of that ego and the bantering stopped and it seems like these days people just get along a lot more and just go into the mountains and enjoy it without really thinking too much about who is accomplishing what. That's my perspective, I don't know, other people could have a different perspective. But now I think the climbing community is super cohesive. Estes Park is now seen as a great place to come and get the tools to take to other places in the world. It's a big bouldering hot spot and there's just a lot more energy around it here now, which is great. There's all types of climbing, there's thousands of people that come here to climb on Lumpy Ridge and climb the easy routes and it's recreational climbing and it's a great experience. Then there's the best boulderers in the world that will come here to do their climbing and then the alpine rock climbing is beautiful. Yeah, all types of climbers come here. It's a great climbing scene now I think.

11:37

Interviewer: Climbers of all disciplines but also of all different ages too. [Tommy Caldwell: Yeah.] You might have had some part in that, this acceptance of younger and younger people being trusted up on these slabby climbs or crack climbing. At least with bouldering and sport climbing it seems like kids are encouraged to try it. We get a lot of young athletes coming to Estes Park as well.

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, it's interesting. My dad was trying to teach the local climbing program for the school for a while and most of the parents here in Estes wouldn't let their kids go climbing outside, even sport climbing. It was pretty frustrating for him but I think that the paradigm has just shifted. When climbing for the longest time was thought of as an extreme sport that was only for crazy people. People are realizing that you can make it safe and even going into the mountains can be safe. So now it's something

that families do together or little kids can do. You've seen this in Europe for a while. When I was nineteen or twenty I used to go to France every winter for a couple of months and you'd go to Fontainebleau and you'd see the five year old kid all the way up to the ninety year grandpa all climbing together. It was this thing that for the most part didn't exist in the United States but my family was like that. So it was really cool to go and see that there. Now I think it's starting to become more common. It's a great thing for families to do together. It's a cool thing. It's amazing for kids, kids are naturally, they have a great strength to weight ratio, they need excitement in their lives, they want the adventure and climbing provides all those things for them. Estes is as good as any place for kids to come climb.

Interviewer: Do you have any predictions about where the sport is headed?

Tommy Caldwell: I mean it's hard to say. I think we're just going to see climbing continue to be pushed and more and more people are going to get into it. I think right now one of the biggest changes is that climbing gyms are being built by the thousands around the country. I wouldn't be surprised if there's fifty climbing gyms in construction right now. So all of a sudden places in the Midwest or in big cities are having climbing gyms. They're actually starting to take over the fitness industry a little bit because people are realizing. They're building these big massive gyms that have all the traditional fitness equipment too and people are being introduced to it that way. They come to run on the treadmill and then they realize that climbing is a way more fun way to stay fit. That's bringing probably millions of climbers into the industry. So that's going to create a lot of excitement and it's going to draw from an amazing gene pool of talent. So at the high end it's going to get pushed a lot farther and a lot quicker than it probably has in the past. But also you're going to see a lot more families out there and I feel a little bit lucky that we were, my dad and my family were on the front end of that. We got to do it when we were some of the only people that knew the secret that climbing was this amazing thing that we could do. Now everybody's going to learn about it and that's great, but it's also going to create problems. There's going to be a lot more people in the mountains and that's going to have to make sure that they learn how to not abuse the resource and stay on trails. I think impact is going to become a bigger issue.

15:30

Interviewer: I would think too, things like your Dawn Wall Project are again kind of pushing the idea of where the possibilities are as well.

Tommy Caldwell: Yeah, I think I was lucky that I got into climbing at a time where I was out of place, where I could try and find my niche and do something that people haven't tried in the past. That's an incredibly motivating and exciting place to be. You feel like you get to explore something that nobody has. Yeah, that's really cool.

Interviewer: Are there any last stories you feel like sharing?

Tommy Caldwell: I feel like you touched on most of, a lot of the good ones.

Interviewer: Last memories in Estes.

Tommy Caldwell: This is specifically for a climbing oral history.

Interviewer: In Estes Park.

Tommy Caldwell: Not really, you really kind of touched on all the good ones.

Interviewer: Ok, well thank you for your time.

Tommy Caldwell: Welcome. Yeah, no problem.

16:50 [End of Part C. End of Interview.]

Note: Added material appears in brackets.

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ABSTRACT: World famous local, national and international climber Tommy Caldwell was raised in Estes Park and is the son of well-known climber Mike Caldwell. Tommy began his distinguished climbing career at age three, climbed Longs Peak at age seven or eight and was probably the youngest climber to climb the Diamond at age 12. Along with his father, Tommy has left his mark through the development of many internationally recognized sport climbing routes such as those on the Monastery crag near Drake; Sarcasm a 5.14a route on the Diamond; and very challenging routes at the Fortress of Solitude near Rifle. His career has transitioned from traditional climbing, to competitions in the gym climbing arena, to sport climbing and then back to traditional and free climbing along with bouldering - a very talented all around climber. Tommy shares his love for the beauty of the mountains and for climbing.

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